

Hold the Fries: Older Americans and Food Choices

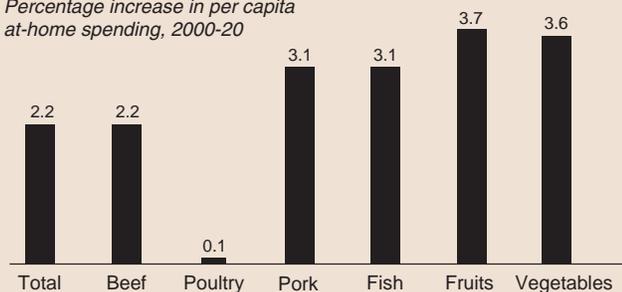
Increases in average life expectancy and the aging of the baby boom generation are combining to push the share of older people in the U.S. population to historically high levels. The population age 60 and older is predicted to rise from 16 percent in 2000 to 23 percent in 2020. The share of children, by comparison, is expected to drop by 3 percentage points, and the share of adults age 20-59 will drop by 4 percentage points.

Older Americans are less active than younger people, eat less food, dine out less, and have distinct food preferences. These characteristics, in light of population trends, will affect how much Americans spend on food and the types of foods they eat. ERS conducted an extensive study to understand how population growth, income growth, and shifts in other demographics—including aging—will affect U.S. food spending and consumption in 2020. The predicted net effect of all these trends is to increase per capita spending on food away from home by 8.1 percent from 2000 to 2020. By contrast, age-related factors alone, including lower earnings, reduced mobility, more time to prepare meals, and likelihood of eating lunches at home rather than at work, are predicted to reduce per capita spending on food away from home by 1 percent. The age factor will, however, boost at-home food spending by 2.2 percent per person, partially because older people may buy smaller portioned, more expensive products and may have their groceries delivered. These food-at-home purchases also reflect the change in preferences that occurs as people age—older Americans tend to spend more on fruits, vegetables, pork, and fish to eat at home.



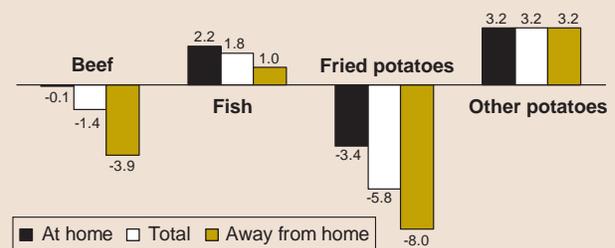
An aging population will drive up spending on at-home foods

Percentage increase in per capita at-home spending, 2000-20



Older Americans favor baked potatoes over fries

Percentage change in per capita consumption, 2000-20



Food consumption—in terms of amounts and types—also changes as people age. Though older Americans will spend less on food away from home, they will consume more fish and potatoes other than french fries, both away from home and at home. Older people also eat more vegetables at home. Overall, the age factor alone is predicted to reduce total per capita consumption of fried potatoes, beef, poultry, cheese, sugar, grains, and tomatoes. \mathcal{W}

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For more information, see *Food and Agricultural Commodity Consumption in the United States: Looking Ahead to 2020*, by Biing-Hwan Lin, Jayachandran Variyam, Jane Allshouse, and John Cromartie, AER-820, February 2003, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/AER820/ and *Food Expenditures by U.S. Households: Looking Ahead to 2020*, by Noel Blisard, Jayachandran Variyam, and John Cromartie, AER-821, February 2003, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/AER821/

In addition to examining the aging of America, these reports look at how rising incomes, higher educational attainment, improved knowledge of diets and health, growing popularity in eating out, and a more racially and ethnically diverse population will shape future U.S. food spending and consumption.



Food Stamps and Child Poverty

In 2000, 8.8 million children received food stamps, making the Food Stamp Program a significant component in the well-being of children in many low-income households. To shed light on the efficacy of food stamps in helping households meet basic needs, ERS researchers added the value of food stamp benefits to household income and then measured the effect on child poverty rates. This “food stamp effect” reduced the number of children in poverty in 2000 by 4 percent, lifting about 500,000 children out of poverty. Such reductions in child poverty are limited by the structure of the Food Stamp Program, where the value of benefits declines as a household’s income increases. Although the Food Stamp Program is not designed to reduce child poverty, food stamps do augment the purchasing power of poor households and can improve the well-being of people living in poverty. Augmenting income with the value of food stamp benefits has the effect of reducing child poverty by 20 percent or more. The analysis of the depth and severity of poverty reveals that the Food Stamp Program plays an important role in improving the welfare of children in low-income households. \mathcal{W}

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For more information, see *Issues in Food Assistance—How Do Food Assistance Programs Improve the Well-Being of Low-Income Families?* by Joshua Winicki, Craig Gundersen, and Dean Jolliffe, FANRR-26-9, October 2002, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr26/fanrr26-9/